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ABSTRACT

Cohort differences in perceptions of age appropriate behavior during adulthood were examined. The specific question was to what degree members of three different cohort groups who share a common familial background differ on the degree of acceptance expressed regarding age appropriate behaviors. The sample consisted of three groups of women: college students, their mothers, and their maternal grandmothers. Subjects (n=256) were administered a questionnaire designed to assess adult behaviors in three broad categories: recreation, occupation/career, and family. Findings indicated greatest agreement on appropriateness of age constraints concerned family relationships while least agreement concerned those involving recreation activities. Younger subjects were most tolerant of behaviors performed by individuals at varying ages, while older subjects most closely adhered to age constraints. Results provided support for the theory of adult development that proposes that adherence to age norms increases throughout the lifespan. (Four tables are appended.) (Author/YLB)

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Age Appropriate Behaviors: A Cross Generational Assessment

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Abstract

The purpose of the present investigation was to examine differences in perceptions of age appropriate behavior in adulthood among three groups of women. Subjects (N=256) were administered a questionnaire (Neugarten et al., 1965) designed to assess adult behaviors in three broad categories: Recreation, Occupation/Career, and Family. Major findings included: (1) greatest agreement on appropriateness of age constraints concerned family relationships while least agreement concerned those involving recreation activities, and (2) younger subjects were most tolerant of behaviors performed by individuals at varying ages while older subjects most closely ascribed to age constraints. Results provided support for the theory of adult development which proposes that adherence to age norms increases throughout the lifespan.

Age Norms: A Cross-Generational Assessment

In all societies, chronological age is a primary criterion by which behavior and social interactions are regulated. Numerous overt and covert expectations exist regarding age-specific behavior which irrevocably establish guidelines for appropriate performance and adaptation throughout the lifespan. Such expectations, implicit and explicit, operate to sanction a wide variety of social functions ranging from personal preferences (e.g., mate selection, personal appearance and dress, bearing of children) to those related to global aspects of social interaction (e.g., selecting an occupation, achieving a measurable degree of social status, electing to change career direction). Age-related expectations allow for slight variations in the achievement of status and the display of some behaviors, and generally operate as sources of disapproval for behaviors considered "untimely" (either "too early" or "too late") for adults participating in a particular society.

Background and Literature Review

Elaborating on the phenomenon of age norms as social determinants, Neugarten and Hagestad (1976) proposed that by early adulthood most individuals have developed a "mental map of the life cycle" (p. 35). Such a cognitive construct enables: anticipation of events; internalization of culture-specific norms for performance; and development of an awareness of social classes, constraints, and status related primarily to age. To further explore the implications of age norms in adulthood two assumptions, primary to understanding the impact and strength of the age norm system, must be considered: (1) an individual's identification and adherence to given age-constrained norms is meaningful only in relational terms and is always subjective; and (2) the impact of chronological age as an index for social functioning has meaning only when there is knowledge of a given culture and comprehension of the meanings attached to behaviors at given ages (Matter, 1982; Neugarten & Hagestad, 1976;).

Understanding how the concept of age norms affects both the perceptions and acceptance of behavior involves acknowledging several features which individually and collectively account for the variations seen in people's adherence to age norms. These characteristics of the age norm system include the following: (1) age strata and age grading, i.e., delineating age as the criterion for group membership, and developing more elaborate stages in the life span as a society becomes increasingly sophisticated (Cain, 1964); (2) plural systems of age grading and the ascription of various age statuses by institutional affiliation (e.g., legal, political, or familial); (3) age as a measure of rank or position in a society varies by culture and reflects both the value placed on a particular age, and behavioral characteristics/expectations associated with the age (Cameron, 1969; Cryns, & Monk, 1973; Otteson, & Tanke, 1980; Rosow, 1975); (4) sophistication of role differentiation and ease of role transition are a direct construction of age norms (Bengtson, 1973; Hagestad, 1975; Rosow, 1974); (5) sex accounts for substantial differences in individuals' perception of and reaction to age norms; and (6) age norms define patterns and styles of interaction for individuals of differing ages (Barker & Barker, 1961; Hess, 1972; Hochschild, 1973; Jacobs, 1974; Parsons, 1942; Roscow, 1967). Collectively, these characteristics indicate age norms operate effectively as monitors of social behavior, and also serve as criteria for evaluating personal success (Higen, 1980).

A critical issue in the examination of the impact of age norms is the measure of awareness and consistency expressed by individuals. Previous research has revealed that particular groups hold very clear notions of social expectations (Sofer, 1970) but that different aged groups hold greater or lesser attitudes toward age related behaviors (Neugarten, Moore & Lowe, 1965). As social change necessitiates the development of an increasing number of life stages and subsequently sanctions behavior defining and accompanying these stages, cohort differences in the timing of adherence to norms and role transitions become increasingly apparent (Neugarten, 1968).

It was the purpose of the present investigation to examine cohort differences in perceptions of age appropriate behavior during adulthood. The specific question addressed was the following: to what degree do members of three different cohort groups who share a common familial background differ on the degree of acceptance expressed regarding age appropriate behaviors. Based upon results of previous research (Neugarten, 1974; 1976), the present study assumed: (1) there is a range of years within which the performance of a given behavior is deemed acceptable for a majority of behaviors; (2) the degree of acceptability may vary but in general the behavior will be tolerated by most individuals, and (3) a behavior will be regarded as unacceptable if it occurs outside this parameter (range of years).

Methods

Subjects

The sample for this investigation consisted of three groups of women: college students (Group I); their mothers (Group II); and their maternal grandmothers (Group III) (see Table 1). Group I, students enrolled in human growth and development classes at a midwestern university, comprised the "target" subject pool as they were used to identify respondents comprising Groups II and III. Group I subjects were asked to participate in the study under the following conditions: (1) a willingness to complete the questionnaire; and (2) provision of the names and addresses of both their mothers and maternal grandmothers who, to the best of their knowledge, would be able to complete the instrument. Subjects in groups II and III were subsequently sent a cover letter exlaining how they had been identified, an instrument to complete, and a stamped addressed envelope for returning the completed questionnaire. All subjects involved in the study were informed that their responses would be confidential and comparisons would not be made within a family group. Response rates were for Group II, were 82% and Group III, 87 %.

Insert Table 1 Here

Instrument

The instrument used in this investigation was a modification of the "Most People's Opinions About Age" survey developed by Neugarten et al. (1965). Designed to elicit subjects' responses to a series of age graded behaviors, the questionnaire consisted of 30 randomly distributed items, each presenting a single behavior performed by individuals at three different adult ages. Subjects were directed to rate the appropriateness of the behavior in relation to the age of the performer. The items presented an approximately balanced selection of adult behaviors occurring in three broad categories as defined by Neugarten: (1)Recreation, appearance, and consumption behaviors; (2) Occupation/Career; and, (3) Family cycle. Varying ages were used on items to prevent a response set. Many of the same items originally incorporated in Neugarten's questionnaire were included, however, modifications were made with regard to the following: elimination of 15 items deemed to be dated, sexist in language/intent, or repetitive; use of a continuous rather than a categorical rating scale; and subjects reporting their personal assessment of the appropriateness of the behaviors rather than their prediction of how others would respond. Subjects were asked to read each item and decide the degree to which they approved or disapproved of a person that age peforming the stated behavior. They were to indicate their degree of approval by marking an "x" at the appropriate point on a continuum with anchors of "Approve" and "Disapprove." Numerical values were subsequently assigned by using a scale ranging in value from zero through nine (i.e., nine was assigned to a response indicating a highest degree of disapproval and zero to a response of total approval). Questionnaires were color-coded to identify group membership upon receipt. Additional information

was requested for subject's age, marital status, occupation and employment history. Data, including demographic information, were analyzed by means of parametric procedures (ANOVA) utilizing Scheffe's of multiple comparison test.

Results

Data were examined by three separate categories depicting adult behaviors (i.e., Recreation, Occupation/Career, and Family). Of primary interest was whether group members approved or disapproved of specific behaviors being performed at various ages, and to what extent there was agreement between generational groups. Disapproval of a behavior was concluded when subjects' responses equalled a mean value of 4.5 or below; approval was inferred if responses had a mean value of 4.6 or above.

Nine behaviors, which included 27 sub-items, comprised the Recreation category. Statistical differences at least at the .05 level of significance occurred between subject groups on 18 of 27 items (see Table 2). For all of these, grandmothers' ratings (as determined in post hoc analyses) were significantly different from those of both their daughters and granddaughters. College students (granddaughters) were most approving of a behavior regardless of the performer's age, while grandmothers were most disapproving overall. The exception occurred with items which reflected negative images of aging (e.g., applying the expression "You can't teach an old dog new tricks," and refusal of a woman to celebrate her birthday). Behaviors which suggested a disfavorable or disapproving attitude toward aging were most likely to be approved of by the oldest group of participants. Mothers, who for the most part were in the stage of middle adulthood, were most approving of behaviors which dealt with parents and middle aged adults spending money on themselves for recreational items such as convertible cars and Cadillacs.

Insert Table 2 Here

The category Occupation/Career consisted of 33 items for 11 age-specific behaviors. Significant differences were found on 15 of the 33 sub-items (see Table 3). As in the previous category, the oldest generation of subjects (grandmothers) differed significantly from either their daughters or granddaughters, or both whenever significant differences occurred. Each group was most approving of behaviors when a member of a generation other than their own was risking a monetary investment. Grandmothers approved of situations in which career decisions were made at younger ages, and of behaviors which reinforced traditional work responsibilities. Grandmothers were also more approving of women maintaining their primary responsibilities to home and family. Their daughters, in contrast, were most approving of behaviors dealing with career changes in mid-life (e.g., quitting work to go to college), and planning for future career-related changes (e.g., planning for an early retirement during the stage of early adulthood.) Granddaughters were the most liberal with respect to changing occupations and women changing careers throughout adulthood, but were most disapproving of risking financial security during early adulthood.

Insert Table 3 Here

In the Family category, the fewest number of significant differences (13 out of 30 items) were found between groups (see Table 4). Greater agreement between generations occurred relative to familial issues than to Recreational or Career activities. When significant differences did arise

they were most likely the result of the grandmothers' disapproval of behaviors depicting a change from traditional models of early marriage, child rearing practices, and dependence/independence in old age. Converesely, granddaughters were most discordant from their grandmothers as evidenced by their approving of acquiring children through birth or adoption at any age. In general, all three groups were tolerant of behaviors occurring at a variety of ages/developmental stages if they were family related but less accepting if behaviors fell outside the family realm.

Insert Table 4 Here

Discussion

A general examination of data indicated participants in all three groups tended to be more approving than disapproving of behaviors regardless of the performer's age. Although significant differences occurred between generations in their ratings, responses tended more often than not to be on the end of the continuum expressing tolerance of age flexibility in behavior. It appeared, however, that as subjects' age increased, as inferred by group membership (i.e., college students, mothers and grandmothers), approval of societal "age norm" violations decreased. There was a significant increase in the extent to which participants ascribed importance to age norms and placed constraints upon adult behaviors in terms of age appropriateness as the participants' themselves aged.

In sum, the major findings of the present study were:

(1) General agreement occurred between subject groups as evidenced by their overall acceptance of behaviors in each of the three categories (Recreation, Occupation/Career, Family). This agreement was highest for items concerned with family relationships and least for those

depicting engagement in Recreational activities. It appears the transmittal of family values and expectations across generations is more consistent than is that related to other areas of adult life.

(2) In all three categories, participants were most likely to disagree on the appropriateness of behaviors when the age associated with it was most variant from what might constitute the socially acceptable age norm (e.g., a woman wearing her hair in a pony tail at age 45; a man who enlists in the Navy at age 35; a man who marries a 60 year old woman when he is 50.)

(3) Age constraints were not uniformally associated with each of the three subject cohort groups. For example, college students were not always approving of behaviors displayed by their cohort group. This reflected an adherence to age constraints regardless of the cohort affiliation of subjects.

(4) Across all three categories, students comprised the group most tolerant of behaviors performed by individuals at varying ages, thus they were the group most accepting of violations of age norms. The opposite finding was observed for grandmothers, indicating they ascribved more closely to age constraints and age status regarding the acceptability in all categories. Grandmothers maintained more traditional expectations (i.e., maintenance of the work ethic and role of women as homemakers and mothers) especially in the categories of Recreation and Occupation/Career. Students were least likely to approve of traditional roles but still exhibited levels of disapproval which acknowledged an adherence to age constraints.

The greater disapproval of age norm violations by grandmothers supports the theory of adult socialization which proposes that personal belief in the relevance and validity of social norms increases throughout the adult lifespan (Neugarten & Hagestad, 1976). With age and maturity, individuals become more aware of the existence and necessity for adherence to age graded behavior (Higan, 1980; Otteson & Tanke, 1980; Rosow, 1975). The number of significant differences found

between groups supports the interpretation that age norms are different for the three subject groups over a wide variety of adult behaviors. The findings are consistent with the conclusions drawn by Neugarten et al. (1965) "that age norms are salient over a wide variety of adult behaviors and support the view that adult socialization produces increasingly clear perception of these norms as well as an increasing awareness that the norms provide constraints upon adult behavior" (p. 717).

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Table I:
Description of Participants

Item	Category	Frequency
Number of subjects	Group I	N=95
	Group II	N=78
	Group III	N=83
Age ranges		
	24 years or younger	N=95
	25 to 44 years	N=53
	45 to 65 years	N=65
	66 years or older	N=43
Primary Occupation (by group)		
Group I	Students	N=95
Group II	Employed/retired	N=23
	Homemaker	N=58
Group III	Employed/retired	N=33
	Homemaker	N=47
Marital Status (all subjects)		
	Single	N=94
	Married	N=118
	Divorced	N=11
	Widowed	N=33

Table 2
Age Norm Category 1: Recreation, appearance, and consumption behaviors

	Group Means		
	I	II	III
A man who feels his age entitles him to spend money on himself instead of saving it for his children:			
when he's 60	1.17	1.45	1.08
when he's 50	2.49	2.24	3.46*
when he's 40	4.67	4.45	4.11''
A woman who feels it's alright at her age to wear a two-piece bathing suit to the beach:			
when she's 45	4.07	4.60	5.75'
when she's 30	2.28	2.67	3.21**
when she's 18	.61	.93	.92
A man who buys himself a red convertible:			
when he's 60	2.72	2.37	4.75''
when he's 45	2.08	1.96	3.28''
when he's 25	1.08	1.16	1.43
A woman who wears her hair in a pony tail:			
when she's 45	4.33	5.94	7.33''
when she's 30	2.97	4.12	4.05''
when she's 19	1.04	1.25	1.09
A man who begins to apply to himself the saying, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks":			
when he's 40	6.15	6.69	6.12
when he's 55	6.05	5.67	4.66''
when he's 70	5.01	4.36	3.42'
A couple who decide their age entitles them to take 6 months off from work to travel to Europe:			
when they're 35	4.06	4.48	5.33**
when they're 50	2.25	2.51	2.62
when they're 65	1.06	1.15	1.55
A man who is thinking of what to include in his will:			
when he's 30	1.31	1.93	3.22''
when he's 45	1.06	1.42	2.08''
when he's 60	.09	1.28	2.03'

Table 2 continued

	I	II	III
A woman who refuses to celebrate her birthday:			
when she's 25	7.22	6.58	5.90''
when she's 35	6.89	6.22	5.66'
when she's 50	6.24	5.76	5.71
A man who feels his age entitles him to drive a Cadillac:			
when he's 30	3.08	4.07	4.74'
when he's 40	2.53	2.98	3.52'
when he's 50	2.20	2.05	2.24

* p< .05, two-tailed; ** p< .01, two-tailed; 'p< .005, two-tailed; ''p<.001, two-tailed.

Table 3
Age Norm Category II: Occupation/Career

	Group Means		
	I	II	III
A doctor who starts concrete planning for his retirement:			
when he's 30	3.46	2.54	3.56*
when he's 40	2.44	2.12	2.38
when he's 55	1.42	2.50	2.86'
A married man who quits work to go to college full time:			
when he's 40	4.35	4.35	5.26
when he's 30	3.46	3.11	3.33
when he's 20	1.62	1.51	2.09
A businessman who's willing to move over and make room for a younger man:			
when he's 35	5.31	6.64	6.73**
when he's 50	3.82	4.69	4.35
when he's 60	2.53	2.69	1.24''
A man should expect to be holding his top job:			
when he's 30	4.06	5.34	5.29''
when he's 40	2.01	2.26	2.33
when he's 50	1.58	1.51	2.16
A lawyer who decides it's time to start tapering off:			
when he's 40	5.55	6.31	6.21*
when he's 50	3.92	3.90	2.69'
when he's 60	2.02	1.46	1.70
A woman who is not yet married and feels she might as well try wholeheartedly to make a career for herself:			
when she's 25	1.99	2.74	2.89
when she's 30	1.62	1.69	2.43*
when she's 35	1.27	1.37	2.06*

Table 3 continued

	I	II	III
A man who's willing to move his family from one town to another to get ahead in his company:			
when he's 45	2.73	3.64	3.70*
when he's 35	2.14	1.99	1.79
when he's 25	1.24	1.22	2.86
A man who risks his savings in a new business venture:			
when he's 60	4.91	6.12	6.97''
when he's 45	4.83	3.54	3.40''
when he's 30	4.40	1.67	2.20''
A man who looks for a boss who will take him under his wing and show him the ropes:			
when he's 50	5.69	5.91	6.26
when he's 35	3.79	3.39	2.96
when he's 25	2.16	1.58	1.20'
A man who gets his first full time job:			
when he's 29	5.09	5.45	5.08
when he's 25	3.23	3.52	3.03
when he's 21	1.49	1.58	1.78
A man who enlists in the Navy:			
when he's 35	4.07	5.33	6.70''
when he's 25	2.08	2.77	2.75
when he's 20	1.08	.94	.65

* p< .05, two-tailed; ** p< .01, two-tailed; 'p< .005, two-tailed; ''p<.001, two-tailed.

Table 4
Age Norm Category III: Family Cycle

	Group Means		
	I	II	III
A married couple who keep going to their parents for advice:			
when they're 40	6.15	6.17	6.92
when they're 30	4.95	4.64	4.60
when they're 20	2.36	2.07	1.78
A married couple who are still willing to have their parents help support them:			
when they're 35	7.23	7.57	7.41
when they're 25	5.76	5.54	6.04
when they're 20	3.75	4.51	4.21
A women who feels too young to be a grandmother:			
when she's 55	6.36	6.88	6.78
when she's 50	5.69	6.42	6.01
when she's 45	4.65	5.17	4.97
A man who still prefers living with his parents rather than getting his own apartment:			
when he's 30	7.17	6.81	6.93
when he's 25	5.38	5.45	4.97
when he's 21	2.64	2.85	2.64
A woman who decides to have another child:			
when she's 45	6.41	7.33	7.31'
when she's 37	4.14	4.86	4.45
when she's 30	1.53	1.33	1.19

Table 4 continued

	I	II	III
A married couple who starts to adopt a child:			
when they're 23	1.11	1.60	2.78''
when they're 35	1.61	2.41	2.16*
when they're 45	4.08	6.10	6.43''
A man who marries a 60-year-old woman:			
when he's 50	2.09	3.72	4.83''
when he's 55	1.22	2.07	2.64''
when he's 65	.86	.89	1.21
A man who feels too old to undertake rearing another child:			
when he's 35	6.45	5.74	5.16**
when he's 40	4.72	4.04	4.28
when he's 50	2.24	2.65	3.29*
Parents who move across the country so they can be near their children when the parents are:			
at age 40	4.73	5.92	6.83''
at age 55	3.70	4.24	5.07'
at age 70	2.13	2.51	2.97
Parents who are ready to have their children support them when the parents are:			
at age 55	6.64	7.75	7.68''
at age 65	5.11	6.65	6.72''
at age 75	3.07	4.81	4.55''

* p< .05, two-tailed; ** p< .01, two-tailed; 'p< .005, two-tailed; ''p<.001, two-tailed.